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TAGS: PREL PGOV GG RS

SUBJECT: TFGG01: PARLIAMENT TO URGE RECOGNITION OF ABKHAZ,
SOUTH OSSETIAN INDEPENDENCE

REF: MOSCOW 2491

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Russian upper (Federation Council) and lower (Duma) houses of parliament will hold simultaneous but separate emergency sessions at 10 a.m. local time on August 25 to review developments in South Ossetia and to consider steps in support of independence for both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. While Federation Council and Duma leaders, as well as leaders of Duma factions, have publicly postured in favor of Russia recognizing the two entities as independent states, other prominent voices have counseled that now is not the time for Russia to recognize independence. Nevertheless, DFM Ryabkov told the Ambassador August 22 that he could not predict the outcome of the parliamentary debate, and reiterated Saakashvili had "destroyed" Georgia's territorial integrity, an assertion the Ambassador strongly rejected. The fervor for recognition is fed by resilient public resentment of foreign criticism of Russia's military intervention and (perceived) opposition to "Georgian aggression." Medvedev himself may have to make the choice between additional international consequences for Russia (and himself personally) and aligning with strong parliamentary support for South Ossetia. END SUMMARY.

Parliament Cuts Short Its Recess

¶2. (C) The Federation Council (upper house) and Duma (lower house) will hold concurrent but separate emergency sessions at 10 a.m. local time on August 25 to review developments between Russia and Georgia since August 7. The parliament was not scheduled to return from its summer recess until September. Some critics have questioned the absence of any legislative oversight of Russian government military actions, although none has raised any doubts that members of parliament would express any objections to the military action to oust Georgian forces from South Ossetia. According to comments made by parliament officials, the chambers will consider how to support independence for both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as the formation of a parliamentary committee to investigate war crimes in South Ossetia. In addition to being able to put themselves on the record about the military conflict, the session will constitute a response to appeals by Abkhaz leader Bagapsh and South Ossetian leader Kokoity for recognition of their independence from Georgia. Duma International Relations Committee Chairman Kosachev told Ambassador August 20 that sentiments were running high and that the session would urge recognition in spite of concerns over international consequences (Reftel).

¶3. (C) Russian legislators also noted that in order to sign formal agreements to provide military assistance to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia must first recognize their independence. On March 21, the Duma had adopted a declaration warning that if Georgia continued to seek NATO membership as early as possible, or launched an attack on

Abkhazia or South Ossetia, then legislators would consider recognizing the two breakaway regions. Wording of any declaration or resolution remains unknown, as well as the manner by which the document would be introduced. It could be debated as a proposal from a party, or from a parliamentary committee. LDPR leader Zhirinovskiy and Communist Party leader Zyuganov have both expressed support for recognition of Abkhazia as well as South Ossetia. The only publicly expressed opposition to recognition from a political party (albeit not one with representation in the Duma) has come from Yabloko chairman Mitrokhin, who said it would be "suicide" for Russia.

¶4. (C) Federation Council Chairman Sergey Mironov told press August 21 that he expected that the sessions would endorse recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Legislators would call upon President Medvedev to formally recognize the two, thereby enabling the Russian government to more deeply cooperate with the entities. While Medvedev has not commented on the prospect of a public call to recognize from the Duma, he did meet with Bagapsh and Kokoty earlier this week in Sochi, who requested Russian recognition of their independence. At the time Medvedev announced that "The position of Russia has not changed. We support any decision, which the South Ossetian and Abkhaz nations take in accordance with the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act." FM Lavrov said that possible recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia "rests on future actions of Saakashvili," and then charged that Saakashvili bore personal responsibility for the damage done to Georgian territorial integrity.

Recognition Consequences Understood, but "Emotions High"

¶5. (C) In his August 22 meeting with the newly appointed Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov, the Ambassador expressed concern over his recent conversation with Duma International Relations Chairman Konstantin Kosachev over the prospect of a legislative appeal urging the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Acknowledging that emotions were high, the Ambassador urged Russia to take no rash steps, particularly in light of the commitment under the Six-Point Plan to open "international discussions on security and stability modalities" in the conflict territories. Russia should not prejudge the outcome, the Ambassador argued, and the international community needed to operate within the framework of Georgia's territorial integrity. Ryabkov confirmed that any move to recognize the territories' independence would be built around a presidential decree. In contrast to the recognition of Macedonia, which was "routine, normal and bureaucratic," the decision over South Ossetia and Abkhazia was political.

¶6. (C) Ryabkov stressed that he had taken note of the Ambassador's points, but pointed to recent statements by Medvedev, Putin, and Lavrov, which charged Saakashvili with having squandered Georgia's territorial integrity. Russia had sent a clear signal, he commented, and was carefully reviewing its options with respect to both territories. The resolution in the Duma and upper house was on a "fast track," with Ryabkov warning that the "continuous wave" of critical U.S. statements had added to emotions. While Russia wasn't engaged in a rhetorical war, it was disappointed by Washington's tone. Since August 7, Ryabkov reiterated, Saakashvili had only himself to blame for his behavior, which had created an "unbelievable degree" of mistrust. The Ambassador warned against precipitate actions, noting that the U.S. and Russia had worked in international fora for nearly a decade to secure a lasting and peaceful solution. The goal needed to be the restoration of a process in which the U.S., Russia, the EU, South Ossetians and Abkhaz could work to create a new dialogue mechanism. The Ambassador strongly disagreed with the assertion that Saakashvili had "destroyed" Georgia's territorial integrity. Georgia's sovereignty was a matter of international law and its territorial integrity had to start as the launching point for any discussion.

¶ 7. (C) Russian Joint Consultative Commission Co-Chair and South Ossetia Special Envoy Yuri Popov claimed to us August 22 that the MFA had not been asked to advise the Duma about the possible recognition of South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's independence, and admitted the MFA was "not in a position to hold them back." Popov noted he had tried to discourage recognition, "but you know how it is." He said that after the recognition of Kosovo's independence, Russia had warned that were Georgia to cross certain red lines, this would expedite the process of the recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence. He said it was up to Medvedev to decide whether to recognize the regions' independence. Regarding possible international isolation if the GOR recognized Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence, Popov said Russia had "taken a heavy beating" since last week, and "more beating doesn't matter."

¶ 8. (C) Pundits and advisors have also noted that excessively prescriptive action by the legislators would not be helpful. Human Rights Ombudsman Lukin said August 21 that recognition contradicted Russia's commitment to the Six-Point Plan, including to peaceful mediation to determine South Ossetia's future status. Russian Caucasus experts, in a roundtable discussion with DCM August 21, said recognition of South Ossetia would not solve anything and only create more problems for Russia. They noted that, while many ethnic Georgians have fled areas in South Ossetia, many mixed ethnic communities remain, as well as family and other ties. The implications of recognition and the long-term consequences for the Caucasus as a whole have not been considered in the politicians' rush to do something, they contended.

¶ 9. (C) COMMENT: At a minimum, we expect vocal criticism of Georgia and the U.S. during the Duma and Federation Council debates. We cannot rule out a serious push to pressure the government to recognize either Abkhazia or South Ossetia at this point. Despite the reference to the Helsinki Final Act by Medvedev, who will ultimately have to calculate the domestic and foreign political consequences of recognition, it is not clear whether international commitments and prospects for restored or continuing cooperation will trump domestic national passions.

BEYRLE